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“Should Trade-Unionists be Co-operators ?”

BY THE

REV. E. F. FORREST, M.A.,

VICAR OF PEMBERTON.

Manchester :

PUBLISHED BY THE CO-OPERATIVE UNION LIMITED, LONG MILLGATE.

1904.

"Should Trade-Unionists be Co-operators?"

I HAVE many a time in the past stood upon the co-operative platform to tell you as clearly as I could why I thought it would be to the advantage of the working classes of this town and of this country to join together and work on what is called the "co-operative system."

It is very curious that there are always two sides to a question, and I find a little paper has been put into circulation in our town during the past few days or weeks, and the question asked on that paper is, "Should trade-unionists be co-operators?" and the answer given is "Emphatically no." Now, if I were asked should trade-unionists be co-operators, I should say "Emphatically yes." And there you are—some people take one view and other people take another view. Now the reasons why those responsible for this paper tell you "emphatically no" are rather curious. The first reason they give is this: "One object of trade-unionism is to secure more employment for the people." I don't think that statement is quite correct. I don't know any trade-unionism that provides employment for any people whatsoever. It is perfectly true that trade-unionists, by insisting that the workers are not over worked, give the opportunity for other workers to come in. But that is quite another question.

THE RISE OF TRADE UNIONS AND CO-OPERATION.

The chief reason why trade-unionism exists is because the workers found that it was absolutely impossible for them to make a living wage unless they bound themselves together, and had some sort of understanding, and some sort of power behind the understanding, to put their principles into practice, so that they might get a living

wage, under the best conditions of labour that were possible. When you come to consider the history of trade-unionism you will find that the very reasons which made it necessary for the workers of the various branches of industry to band together to secure their common interests and the best conditions of labour, also made it necessary for them to band themselves together to provide for their common wants under the name of a co-operative society. The "greatest good of the greatest number" is really the object set before trade-unionists, and that is also the object which co-operators set before themselves. There was the same reason for the coming into existence of trade unions as there was for the rise of co-operative societies. In the middle of last century, and in the few years leading up to the middle of last century, the working classes of the country were terribly ground down. The times were bad and their surroundings were bad, and when they did work for wages they didn't always get paid in money. They got paid in kind: that is to say, there was what was known as the truck system, and a man had in many cases to take out part of his weekly wages in provisions which were enormously over valued, and, consequently, the working classes were not getting the full benefit of their labour, or of what was the result of their labour. Very well then, trade-unionism was necessary in order to secure a living wage, and co-operation was necessary to secure that that living wage might be laid out to the very utmost advantage.

"HANDS OFF!"

I will tell you my own reasons why I think that trade-unionists should be co-operators. But first let me read you one little sentence from this paper, which strikes me as rather strange. It is one of the reasons given why trade-unionists ought not to be co-operators, and is as follows:—

"It is a principle of trade-unionism that 'only those engaged in any particular branch of trade should do work in connection with that trade,' and when any instance occurs of workmen performing work

belonging to another branch of trade, the workmen engaged in that branch immediately call out 'hands off.'"

Very well then, if trade unions object to their members being co-operators they ought to have cried "Hands off" long ago, and this leaflet ought to have been signed by Mr. Sam. Woods, or somebody who could speak with authority, and not by two gentlemen who never belonged to a trade union in their life. Of course, it might be said "And you don't belong to a trade union either." That is the very reason why I can speak to you about it. The trade unions probably won't consider it worth their while to notice it officially but, as it is intended to damage co-operation, I, as one who does not belong to trade-unionism, think it perfectly right to say why I consider that trade-unionists ought to be co-operators, if they realise to the full the possibilities of the future for good and the possibilities of the future for evil as regards the working classes.

CO-OPERATION AND TRADE-UNIONISM ON TRIAL.

Co-operation is at present on its trial. It has its candid critics, and it has those who are endeavouring with all their power to put it down. Trade-unionism also, curiously enough, is on its trial. It has those who look upon it with the deepest suspicion, and we have only to remember Taff Vale, or the Penrhyn quarrymen and their long strike, and how time after time the workmen have been worsted in recent decisions in the law courts, and in long struggles with their employers, to know that the very same forces—that is, to put it bluntly, the capitalist forces—are at present working against trade-unionism and against co-operation; and, therefore, what affects one will affect the other, and they are wise when they join hands and face the situation together. There are very very grave problems to be considered, and very mighty and weighty matters that will have to be solved in the near future, and I think the time has come when all working men should band themselves together in all possible ways to try and make their line of defence as strong and as impregnable as possible.

That brings me to another point. It is all very well to know what ought to be done, but you will say, "How are we to get the laws of the country more favourably inclined towards the working classes, and how are we to get the conditions we want when we are ruled so entirely by those who are in a superior position to ourselves?" Well, that is just it. Now you are getting to it.

THE REMEDY.

I say that you will not find that trade-unionism has ever objected to a man taking part in some other pursuit besides his own immediate labour if that man has been working in the interests and for the good of humanity. There is no reason at all why a working man should not be capable of acting on the committees of the town council, and of giving his advice and his experience for all they are worth, because these authorities exist entirely for the good of the masses.

But you say, "How can a man be placed in that position?" Why, only by your voting for him. Vote for the men you want and place them there. And who are the men you want? Well, I think the men who have proved their value on the trade union committees, and on the co-operative societies; the men whose worth you know because they have been tried and proved. The committee-room will be found to have been a grand training ground for your future legislators.

It is exactly the same, is it not, with regard to the friendly societies? Is there any reason why a trade-unionist may not act upon the committee of a friendly society? Certainly not.

May I show you another thing? There is a very vast difference between anything that has ever been arranged or organised under the auspices of trade-unionism and the possibilities that lie before co-operation at the present time. Trade-unionism has been occupied in trying to obtain for the toilers the best wages possible, and the best conditions of labour, and it is perfectly true that one of the rules of trade-unionism is, "One man, one job." But it

is not true to add that trade-unionists have ever laid it down that there must always be "one man, one job, one master." We co-operators are not going contrary to trade-union principles, because trade-unionism has solely regard to the employer and the employed. We ourselves are our own masters, and that makes all the difference. Of course, when we employ labour, then we must conform to the rules of trade-unionism; and so we do. If the rules of trade-unionism are transgressed, then there is trouble, whether they be transgressed by co-operators or by individualists. But the province that we have entered upon by being our own providers is a new departure altogether, and is outside the regulations of the trade unions.

CO-OPERATION AND STRIKES.

Now I want to show you how our system helps the trade-unionists. It is a very lamentable thing—and I regret it extremely, but we have to face facts—that in many cases the workers have been unable to make their voice heard, and they have had to say, "If you won't grant us our conditions, we won't work," and, in consequence, there have been what are called strikes. Strikes are always going on; they are going on now, and they are always going on somewhere, because it is so very hard for the workers to make their position felt. You know what a strike means, because you have had experience of strikes. You know that it means for the wife and children what in Lancashire we call "clemming." And when you find great distress in a town you will find that it is not at all an uncommon thing for co-operators to make large and substantial grants to relieve the distress of the wives and children of those on strike. But, apart altogether from that, there is something even better in co-operation. It isn't simply doing out charity to the needy, but it is helping the weak to be strong. The men and women who join the co-operative stores, and make their purchases there, and allow their dividends to accrue, will find that their little savings in the co-operative bank will increase more and more, until the time comes when they will need it most, in the long lockout or the continued strike. The

man who consistently buys his goods from the stores—and buys them, not because he is obliged to buy them (because he could go somewhere else if he didn't get what he wanted), but because he gets good value for his money—will have a very large balance at his disposal upon which he can draw in the time of a strike, or during a period of trade depression when employment is intermittent.

TWIN SISTERS

Therefore I say that every trade-unionist who knows that under the present conditions his life is one long struggle until the period of universal and industrial peace prevails, should remember the possibilities of having to live for weeks without the accustomed wage, and the co-operative system is the only one I know that will enable him in so simple a manner to provide against such a condition of things. That is why I say that trade-unionists should by all means join the co-operative stores. I have confidence in telling you this, because you will feel. I think, that if trade-unionists should not join co-operative societies, the trade unions would long ago have told them so. But it is not necessary for your trade union leaders to tell you that you must not engage in trade. Were they to do so they would be going beyond their province. We find members of trade unions, conspicuous men in the unions, equally conspicuous in the co-operative world, because they recognise the fact that co-operation and trade-unionism are twin sisters.

CO-OPERATION ALL ROUND.

It has been for many years a serious matter with trade-unionists to try to devise some scheme for the federation of all trade-unions so that in time of distress not simply one trade should help any other branch, but all trades should be amalgamated for the common good of all. I don't know anything that will draw us closer together than will co-operation. In connection with the Co-operative Wholesale Society we are year by year indulging in fresh enterprises, and new fields are constantly being opened up. You will find that men who are working

on trade union committees are co-operators, and trade-unionists are wise in joining the distributive store, so that all workers may be brought into contact and all share equally in the wealth which is being laid up, not for one but for the many. I look upon co-operation as one of the most feasible means of bringing all trades into one great federation, and I look upon the endeavours of trade-unionists and co-operators as tending towards one end, and that is the greatest good of the greatest number. Do not be led away by adverse criticism, but assist to the very utmost of your power the work of our association, which is essentially a people's movement.

TO SUM UP.

Why should the word "traitor" be applied to unionists who are also co-operators, whilst at the same time perfect liberty is allowed to the shopkeeping community to engage in all conceivable industries as shareholders and directors, quite apart from the particular branch of trade to which the individual is supposed to devote himself? Shopkeepers are not fettered in the use of their spare capital or leisure time, because they happen to belong to the Traders' Defence Association. May not a man who is a grocer have at the same time an interest in a colliery or tramway company, a spinning concern, or a mill? What is to prevent the owner of a shop from acquiring property in land or houses at his will?

Well then, if a successful tradesman can turn his superfluous energies to any branch of industry he likes, without being a traitor to principle, why not a working man? To tell us it is contrary to trade union principles is all moonshine. Trade-unionism has solely regard to the relations of employer and employed. It is quite beside the mark to drag it into a discussion on trading with which subject it has nothing whatever to do.

But how can trade union principles be applied to retail trading at all, and how will they work out when applied? Take the principle of "one man, one job," and how do we stand? It would mean that no grocer could also be a

draper, no draper a toy merchant, no chemist a bookseller, and universal providers would, of course, be out of the question. It would also mean one man, one shop, and your multiple shopkeepers would have to be brought to task roundly. Further, it would mean one line, one quality, one price, and your principle of underselling and cutting would be at an end. It would mean that the vexed question of early closing had automatically solved itself when the motive for late sales no longer existed. In short it would mean that the competitive system had wholly passed away, and a system of universal co-operation had taken its place.

With regard to my statement that there was no reason why a working man should not be capable of acting on the committee of the Town Council. There is really little difference in principle between a man giving up his leisure time to acting as a director to a co-operative society, and a man giving up his time and energy to municipal trading. In each case you need men of capacity who are fitted to control without unduly interfering with the experts upon whom they are bound to depend to a certain extent. The Corporation is after all only the official co-operative society of the community, sharing all profits amongst its members when the efforts of municipal traders are crowned with financial success.



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